

# **Program Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Jefferson County Family Court on Habitual Truancy**

**Kara K. Taliaferro-Baughman  
Kent School of Social Work  
University of Louisville**

## **Quantitative Methodology**

The quantitative study will hypothesize that school absences among children who were referred to Jefferson County Family Court via a formal habitual truancy petition decreased upon completion of the court process. The study will be a summative program evaluation. The explanatory strategy of the present study will utilize a preexperimental One-Group Pretest/Posttest design. The researcher will evaluate the Family Court status offense process by measuring the school absences of the participants prior to a formal truancy petition being filed, and again after the child is no longer court active for truancy (Marlow, 2001). The sampling frame will consist of 225 children between the ages of 13 and 15 who were referred to Family Court during the 1999-2000 school year. The researcher will then use simple random sampling to select approximately 100 cases for the study sample. Secondary data will be collected through the use of indirect sources (JCPS school attendance records). The records will indicate the total number of absences during the school year prior to referral to Family Court (August 1998-May 1999), and the total number of absences accumulated during the school year after completing the court process (August 2000-May 2001).

## **Findings**

The results showed a significant difference ( $z=-6.520$ ,  $p<.05$ ) between the mean posttest scores (absences after court) ( $m=85.66$ ,  $sd=43.69$ ) and the pretest scores ( $m=46.23$ ,  $sd=28.05$ ); absences increased after court activity. Males and females did not differ significantly regarding their absences ( $t=2.34$ ;  $p>.05$ ); although, the mean of the males was higher ( $m=97.91$ ,  $sd=44.21$ ) than the mean of the females ( $m=74.16$ ,  $sd=39.31$ ). A significant difference was not found between 13, 14, and 15 year olds ( $F=2.624$ ;  $p>0.05$ ), and the two ethnicity groups (Caucasian and African American) ( $t=-1.48$ ,  $p>.05$ ). The variance in school absences cannot be explained by the age or ethnicity of the participants. Overall, the quantitative results showed that Family Court was not effective in reducing school absences among truancy offenders in Jefferson County Public Schools.

## **Qualitative Methodology**

For the qualitative study, information obtained from children and their parents who have previously been active in Family Court on a habitual truancy petition will focus on their perceptions of the court process. The focus of the qualitative section of the present study will be formative program evaluation. The descriptive strategy will utilize an ethnographic design. The researcher will depict the experiences of previously truant, court active children and their parents as described by them in open-ended questionnaires. Non-probabilistic availability sampling will be used to select six children (and their parents) from the sampling frame who were arraigned on habitual truancy during the 1999-2000 school year, and were between the ages of 13 and 15 at the time the petition was filed.

## **Qualitative Results**

Of the six families that participated, most of them had positive things to say about their experiences in Family Court. They expressed content with court ordered services, such as counseling, claiming that it had helped the family to appropriately address issues of concern. There were two parents who felt that Family Court should be more punitive; giving harsh consequences to youth who are truant. These parents felt as though their child was in control of what happened in their home. One of these parents did not take advantage of services to help her and her family resolve issues surrounding problems in the home.

## **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Evaluating the effectiveness of the Family Court process for truancy charges is an important step in creating a brighter future for our youth. This study shows that the current system for intervening is not effective. Early intervention at the very first indication of truancy is a path that needs to be explored by social workers, school personnel, and legal officials. It is hoped that the results of this study will open the gates for exploration of other legal, school, and social services that might assist in reducing the truant behaviors of today's youth, and determining early intervention techniques for increasing school attendance.



# Is Jefferson County Family Court Effective in Reducing Habitual Truancy?

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Kara K. Taliaferro-Baughman

Kent School of Social Work

University of Louisville



# What is Truancy?

## What are the consequences?

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### ■ **Habitual Truancy**

- Kentucky Revised Statutes outlines that “any child who has been absent from school without valid excuse for three (3) or more days, or tardy without valid excuse on three (3) or more days, is a truant. Any child who has been reported as truant three (3) or more times is an habitual truant. Being absent for less than half of a school day shall be regarded as being tardy”
- Upon determination that a child is habitually truant, the school system files a formal truancy petition in Family Court

### ■ **Family Court Petition**

- Arraignment: where the child will stay pending trial
- Pretrial/Trial: child is found guilty (adjudication) or innocent
- Disposition: consequences for adjudication



# Introduction and Background

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- **Purpose of Study**

- Evaluate the effectiveness of Family Court in reducing school absences
- The recidivism rate of truancy for children who have been through the Family Court process is not currently being tracked

- **Relevance to Social Work**

- Results will show the effectiveness of Family Court on truancy offenders, and may inform of other effective services or interventions



# Introduction and Background

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## ■ Literature Review

- Berg (1985) found a relationship between truancy and delinquency offenders
  - both are affected by similar types of issues
  - come from similar home and educational environments
- Detention does not prevent truancy (Howard, Haynes, & Atkinson, 1986)
- Individualized sanctions may be helpful in addressing the real reason for truancy

## ■ Research Questions

- Quantitative: How effective is the Jefferson County Family Court in reducing habitual truancy among children?
- Qualitative: What are the experiences of the children and their parents who go through the Family Court process for truancy charges?



# Quantitative Research Questions

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- **Is Family Court effective in reducing school absences among truancy offenders?**
- **What is the difference between males and females? different age groups? different ethnic groups?**



# Quantitative Method

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## ■ Design

- Summative program evaluation
- Explanatory strategy
- Preexperimental One-Group Pretest/Posttest design

## ■ Sample

- Sampling frame: 225 Jefferson County Public Schools students ages 13 to 15 who were referred to Family Court during 1999-2000 school year
- Simple random sampling was used to select 102 students for the sample





# Quantitative Method

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## ■ Variables

- Constant: All participants completed Family Court program
- Dependent Variable: School absences
  - ratio level
  - any unexcused absences as documented by JCPS attendance records

## ■ Data Collection

- Secondary data was collected through indirect sources (JCPS attendance records)
- Records indicate the total number of absences for the school years prior to and after court activity



# Results of Quantitative Study

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**Total participants: 102 students**

- **Female:** 52%
- **Male:** 48%
- **Caucasian:** 55.9%
- **African American:** 43.1%
- **Mean Age:** 14.16 (sd=0.82)
- **Age Range:** 13, 14, 15
- **Mode:** 15 years old
- **Median:** 14



# Results of Quantitative Study

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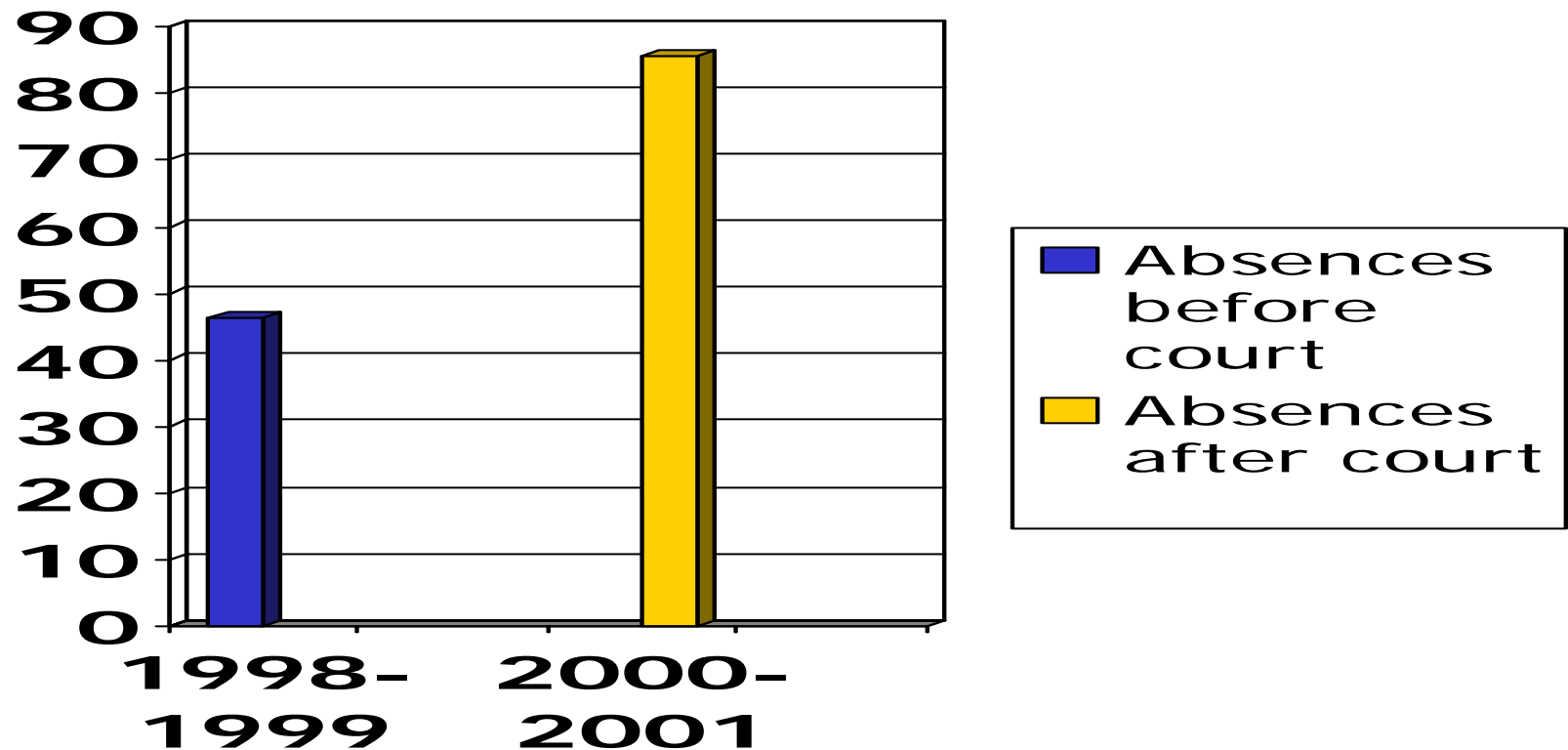
- **Was the intervention effective?**

- Due to skewness, a nonparametrics test (Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test) was performed to compare the mean pretest scores to mean posttest scores. The results showed that the mean posttest scores (absences after court) ( $m=85.66$ ,  $sd=43.69$ ) were significantly higher than the pretest scores ( $m=46.23$ ,  $sd=28.05$ ). This difference is statistically significant ( $z=-6.520$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

- **The change scores (absences after court minus absences prior to court) were calculated and tested to see if demographic variables explained the change in absences.**

- The demographic variables included age, gender, and ethnicity.

# Was the intervention effective?



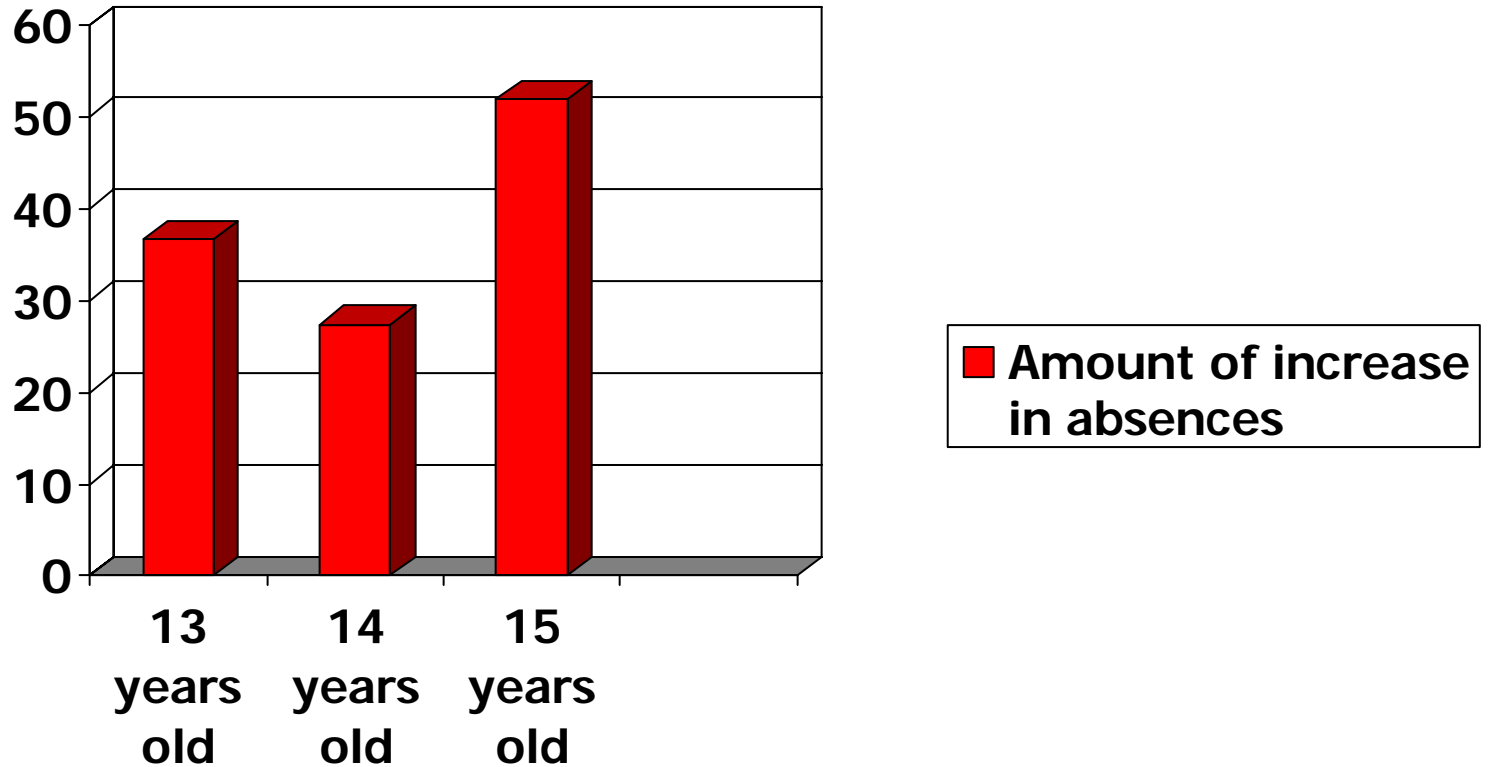


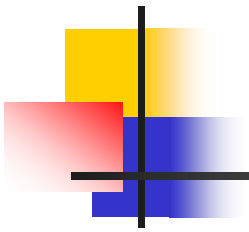
# Is there a difference between different age groups?

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- **A One-way ANOVA was conducted** comparing the absences between 13, 14, and 15 year olds. No significant difference was found ( $F(2,74)=2.624, p>.05$ ). The variance in school absences cannot be explained by the age of the participants.
- **The 15 year olds changed the most** in terms of increase in absences ( $m=51.77$ ). The intervention was least effective for this age group. The 14 year olds ( $m=27.40$ ) and 13 year olds ( $m=36.67$ ) absences did increase after court involvement, but not as much as the 15 year olds, although not significantly.
- **Why?**
  - Intervention not soon enough
  - The child is too far behind in school to catch up
  - The child is close to age 16
  - Family Court is limited in terms of consequences, and the children know this from other students' experiences in court

# Is there a difference between age groups?



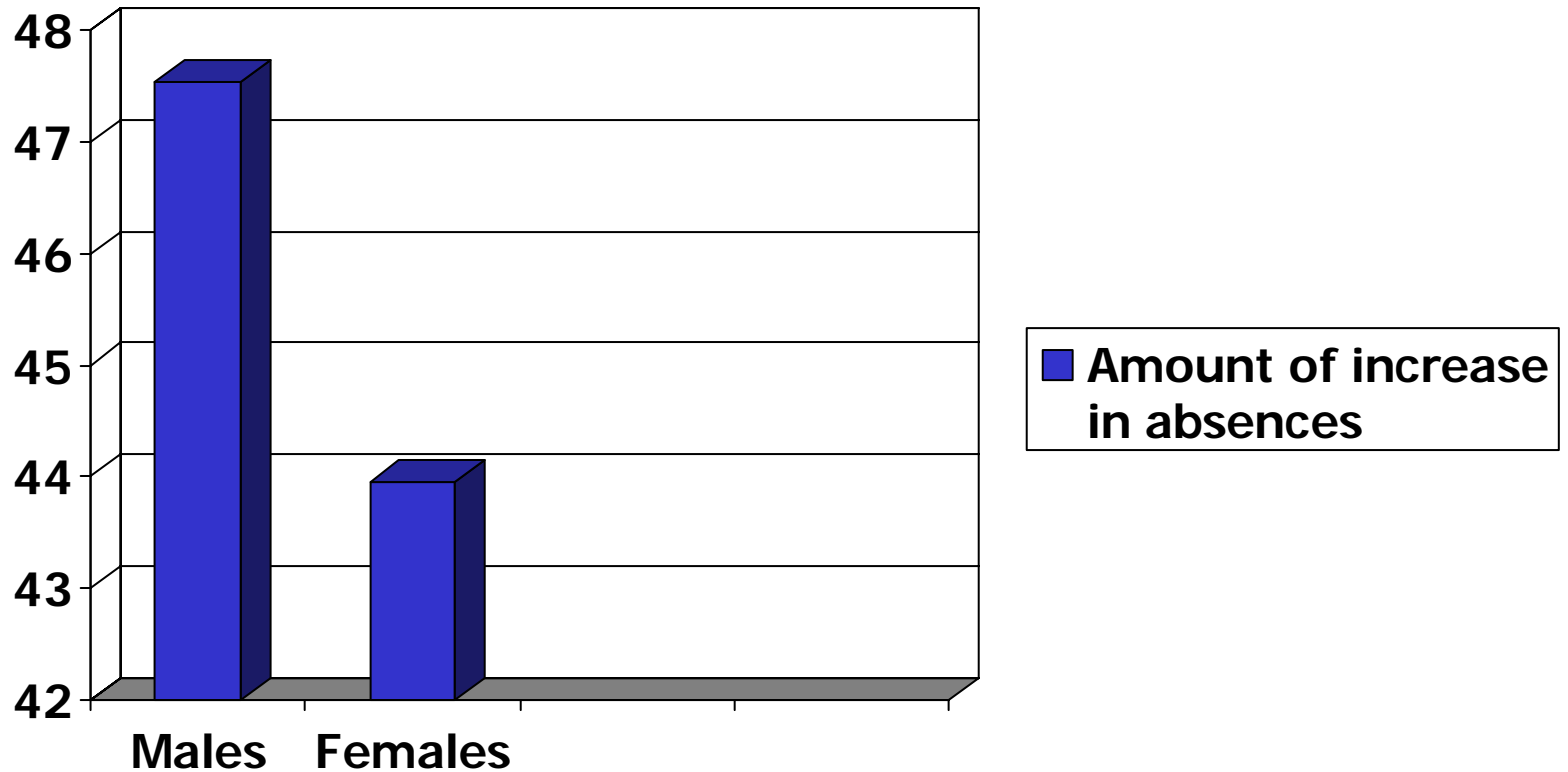


# Is there a difference between males and females?

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- An Independent Samples T-test was performed comparing the change scores of males and females regarding their school absences after court involvement. No significant difference was found ( $t=2.34$ ,  $p>.05$ ).
- Although, the mean change scores of the males was higher ( $m=47.54$ ,  $sd=43.95$ ) than the mean of the females ( $m=31.91$ ,  $sd=37.18$ ).

# Is there a difference between males and females?





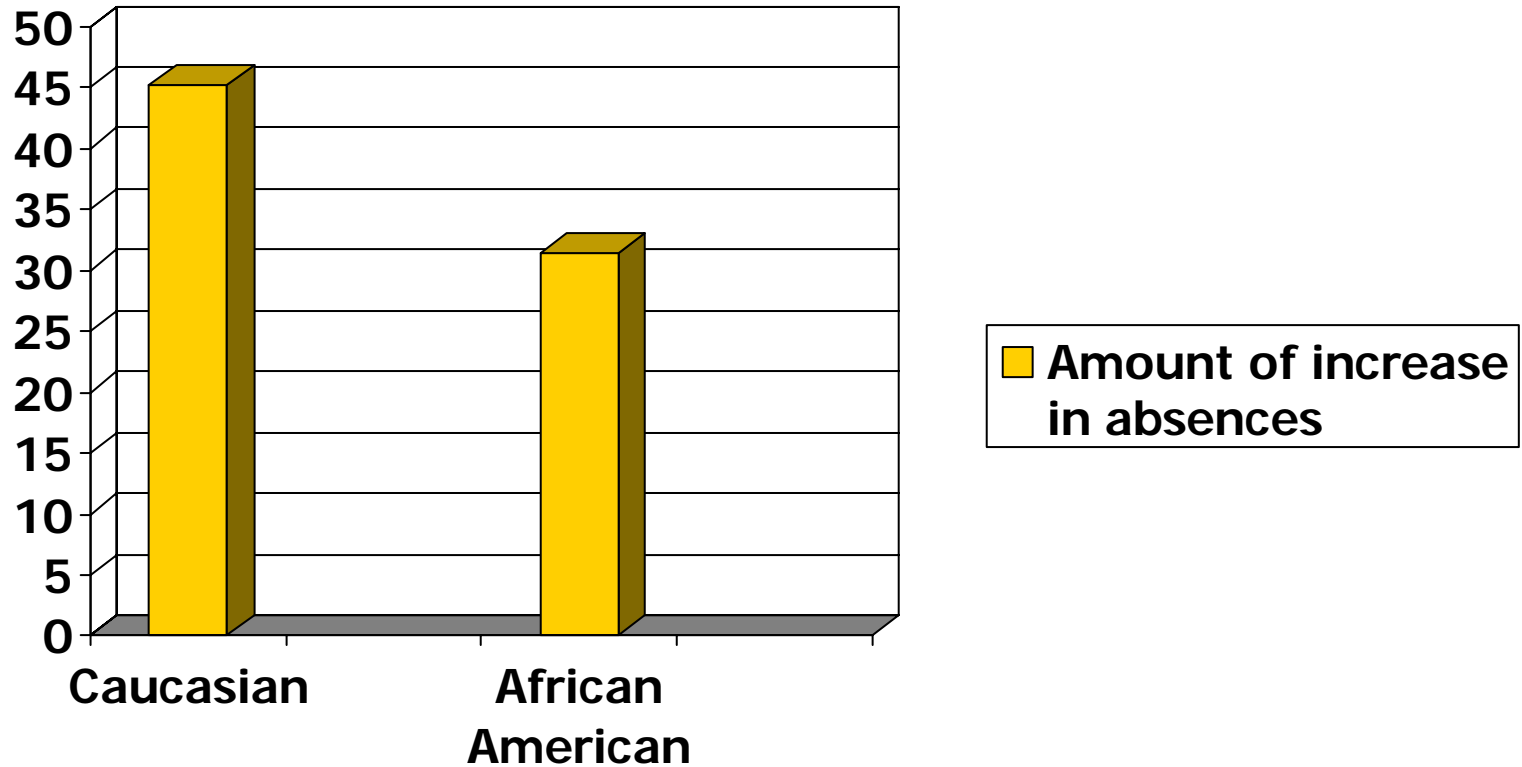


# Is there a difference between ethnicity groups?

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- An Independent Samples T-test compared the mean change scores of Caucasian participants to the mean of African American participants. No significant difference was found ( $t=-1.48$ ,  $p>.05$ ).
- The mean of the Caucasians participants ( $m=45.23$ ,  $sd=42.29$ ) was higher than the mean of the African Americans ( $m=31.38$ ,  $sd=39.05$ ).

# Is there a difference between ethnicity groups?





# Discussion

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- The results showed a significant difference between absences before and after court activity in the wrong direction.
- The Family Court process is not effective in increasing school attendance among truant youth.
- Age, gender, and ethnicity did not have a significant effect on the change in school absences. These variables do not explain the increase in school absences after court involvement.



# Qualitative Research Questions

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- Were the court ordered services appropriate/feasible for the participant's situation?
- Were the services helpful in reducing truancy and/or resolving other issues leading to truancy?
- Did the participants continue to participate with these services after court involvement ceased?
- What could be done to improve Family Court to decrease school absences?



# Qualitative Method

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- **Design**

- Formative program evaluation; Descriptive strategy
- Ethnographic design

- **Sample**

- Non-probabilistic availability sampling
- Six children and their parents chosen from the quantitative sample



# Qualitative Method

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## ■ **Data Collection**

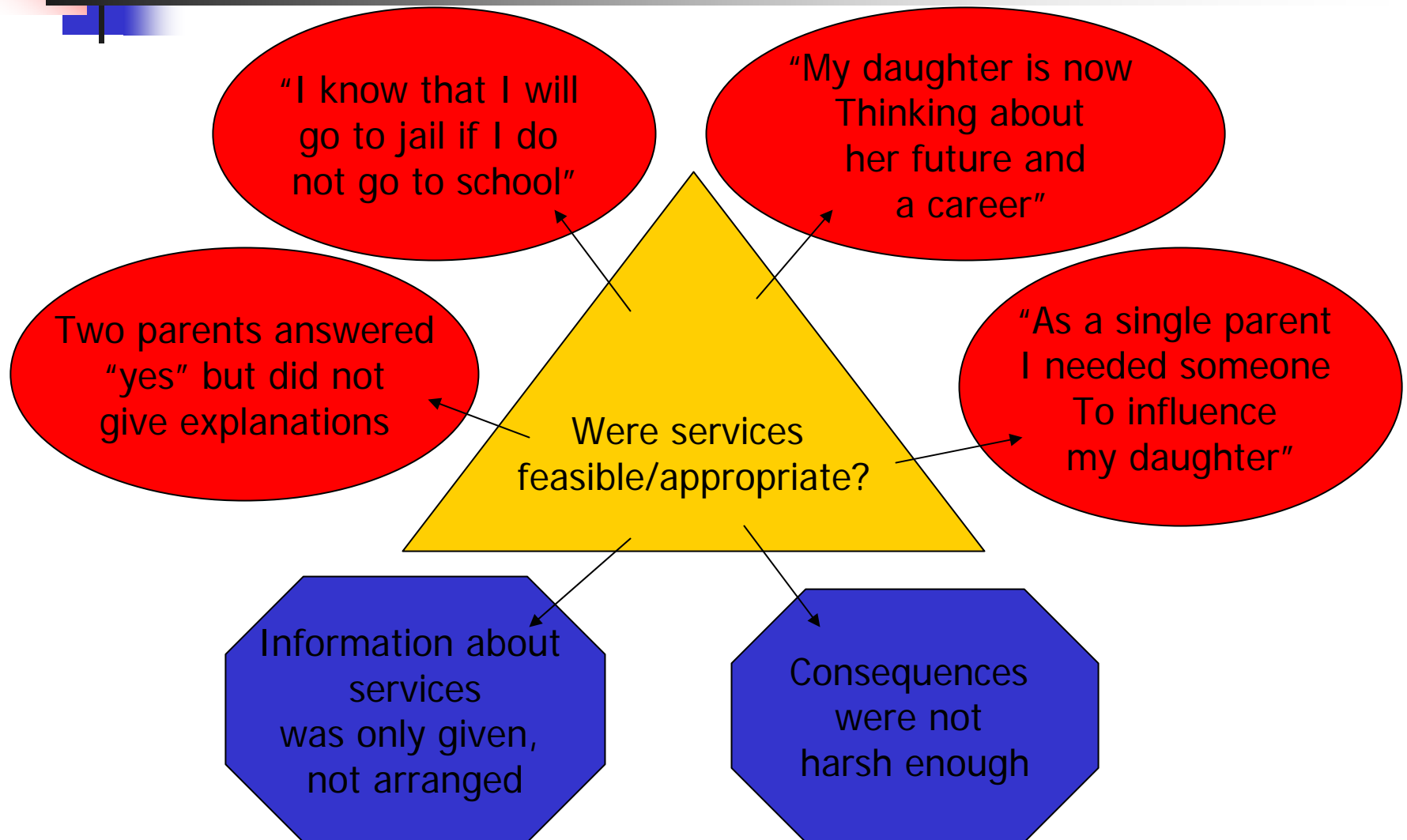
- Open-ended 5-question questionnaire
- Depict the experiences and opinions of children and their parents regarding the Family Court process as described by the participants

## ■ **Data Analysis**

- Researcher-constructed categories were developed into questions
- Categories were coded by positive or negative experiences
- Experiences were presented as expressed by the participants through quotes and paraphrasing

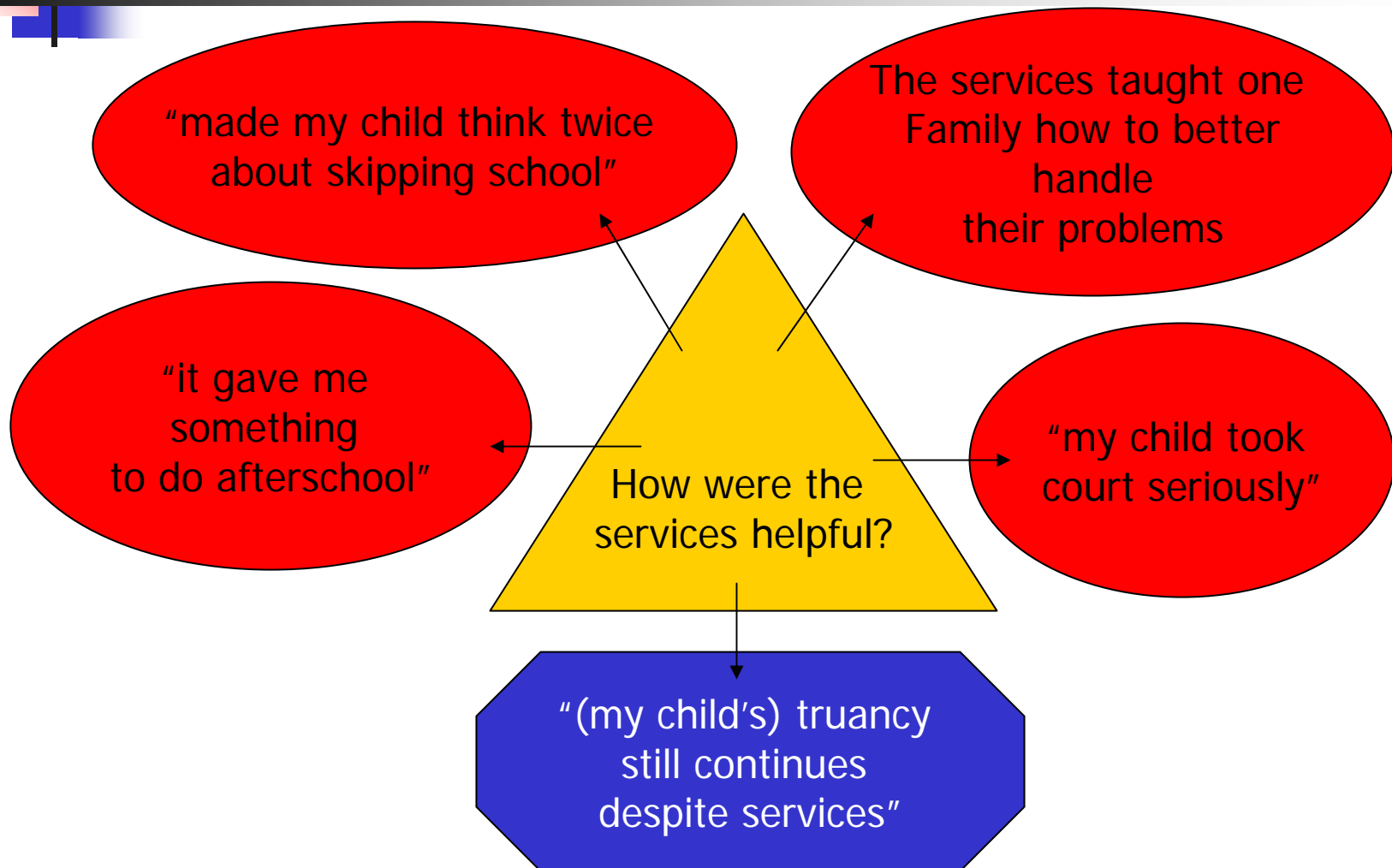


# Qualitative Results





# Qualitative Results







# Qualitative Results

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Did you continue to participate with the services? Why?

Yes. It was in the child's best interest.

The services helped one child learn right from wrong.



# Qualitative Results

"strengthen the punishment"

"Put the kids in jail, boot camp, or give them community service hours"

Stress that the kids, not parents, will face the consequences

How can Family Court be improved?

Give control back to the parents

"the process took too much time away from school/work"

"The court social worker was helpful"



# Discussion

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- Of the 6 families that participated, most of them had positive things to say about their experiences in court.
- Most were pleased with court ordered services, such as counseling or substance abuse treatment, and continued to utilize these services after court involvement ceased.
- Those who reported negatively, either did not take advantage of the services offered, or felt that Family Court should be more punitive.



# Summary

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## ■ **Implications for Future Practice**

- Thorough family assessments prior to arraignment
- Mediation prior to referral to Family Court to include more intensive and individualized services
- Follow up with services
- Intervention to occur at an earlier age (i.e., Truancy Court in elementary and middle schools)

## ■ **Implications for Future Research**

- Evaluating effectiveness of Truancy Court in reducing absences among elementary participants at the middle and high school levels
- Evaluating effectiveness of punitive court systems